

News from Ed Markey

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MARKEY RELEASES NRC DOCUMENTS REVEALING THOUSANDS OF RADIOACTIVE SOURCES ARE MISSING

DOCUMENTS SHOW SHORTCOMINGS IN EXISTING CONTROLS AGAINST TERRORIST "DIRTY BOMB" THREAT

WASHINGTON, D.C. --

Representative Edward J. Markey (D-MA), a senior Member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee today released a letter from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) revealing that in the past 5 years, nearly 1500 radioactive sources have been lost or stolen, and less than half of them have been found.

"It is inexcusable that we should have so many of these radioactive sources turn up stolen, lost or missing," said Rep. Markey. "We've spent years trying to help the Russians control nuclear materials from the former Soviet Union, but it turns out that we have a 'loose nuke' problem right here at home."

The letter, from NRC Chairman Richard Meserve, came in response to a December 4, 2001 letter from Rep. Markey, a longtime advocate of strengthened security at nuclear facilities. Key information contained in the NRC response includes:

- There are 2 million radioactive sources licensed by the NRC and Agreement States in the US. These are used for medical diagnosis and treatment, research, industrial, irradiation of food, and other purposes. Each year, there are on average 300 reports of lost, stolen or abandoned radioactive materials. In the past 5 years, there have been 1495 reports of lost, stolen or abandoned radioactive sources. 835 (or 56%) of these have NOT been found.

- A radioactive source as small as 1-Curie, if dispersed by a bomb, "could spread low-level contamination over an area up to several city blocks, possibly resulting in restriction of the area until the area was surveyed and decontaminated. Assuming the highest risk factors, which involve only a limited number of the many isotopes in use, a few people closest to the explosion might inhale enough radioactive material to obtain internal radiation doses exceeding the NRC regulatory annual limit for members of the public (100 millirem), but they would not be expected to experience any prompt or latent health effects as a result."

- Varying amounts of 21 different radioactive isotopes are currently missing, and for some of these isotopes, the total amount of isotope missing exceeds the amount considered to be pose a high hazard, based data in the Stanford University's Radiation Safety Manual (see <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/EHS/prod/researchlab/radlaser/manual/credits.html>). For example, 2700 Curies of hydrogen-3 are missing, while anything above 10 Curies is a high hazard. More than 0.2 Curies of iodine-125 are missing, while anything above 0.1 Curies is a high hazard.

- Although more than 800 sources remain missing, the NRC has only imposed civil penalties on 16 licensees. The penalty levied in such cases is generally low – about \$3000 for most violations.
- The NRC confirmed that in 1984, it ceased tracking radioactive sources by serial number. The NRC has not yet developed a way to resolve discrepancies in and improve operation of the radioactive materials tracking system they have now.
- The NRC is still unable to account for the whereabouts of two missing fuel rods from the Millstone Nuclear Power Plant near New London, Connecticut. The NRC believes the rods may still be either at the reactor, or at two low-level waste facilities – one in South Carolina and another in Washington State.

Rep. Markey concluded, “The NRC needs to ensure that recovering the remaining materials is a high priority. It also needs to immediately develop a system to better track these materials, and impose higher penalties when licensees lose these dirty bomb ingredients.”

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